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TAGS: PREL PGOV NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIAN POLICE, SOLDIERS ATTACK ABIA MARKET, KILL

4

Classified By: Consul General Brian Browne for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (U) On February 13, military and police officers stormed the Ariaria market in Aba, Abia State killing 4 people, apparently traders. The deaths sparked strong statements of protest from the Abia State government against the GON. Abia State Governor Orji Kalu is an outspoken opponent of the President and has recently attracted federal government (FG) ire by passing a law legitimizing formation of local vigilante groups. This current round of violence may be yet another episode in the feud between Kalu and pro-Obasanjo politicians in Abia who would like nothing better than to wrest control of the state away from their temerarious governor. End Summary.

4 Traders Reportedly Killed by Nigerian Police, Soldiers

¶12. (U) On February 13, Nigerian policemen and soldiers entered the Ariaria market in Aba, Abia State on the pretext of stopping vigilantes from operating there. A firefight ensued, and 4 people were reportedly killed. The Abia Commissioner of Information responded immediately with invective, publicly accusing the FG of "mayhem" and "genocide" against the Igbo people. So far, the state Commissioner of Police has refused to speak to the press. He confirmed some deaths to us, but was unwilling to confirm identities. (Note. Although Umuahia is the state capital, Aba is the largest city and is home to one of the important commercial centers in the Igbo-dominated Southeast. End Note.)

Old Dispute over Control of Law Enforcement Renewed

¶13. (SBU) Approximately one month ago, the Abia State legislature passed the Vigilance Group Bill, authorizing the creation of a state-sponsored law enforcement organization. This state law conflicts with federal legislation prohibiting the formation of vigilante groups. The only authorized law enforcement organization in Nigeria is the federally administered Nigerian Police Force (NPF). However, some states feel that the NPF and military are ineffective. Kano State, for instance, legalized the vigilante group, Hisbah, and is currently embroiled in a supreme court battle to uphold the constitutionality of their legislation.

¶14. (SBU) In Abia State, many people equate the new vigilance law with a resuscitation of the Bakassi Boys, a group originally associated with Governor Kalu in the late 90s, prior to his holding political office and formed to defend businessmen and traders in Aba's markets. As time passed, the group became notorious for extrajudicial killings and torture, and the FG banned it in 2001. (Note. On February 2, 2006 around the same time as the passing of Abia's vigilance law, Abia's Umuahia High Court sentenced to death by hanging 4 Bakassi Boys convicted of the murder and burning of two people whom they accused of an armed robbery in 1999. End Note.)

¶15. (SBU) Before signing the vigilance law, Kalu denied any connection between the new organization contemplated under the state law and his old Bakassi Boys. Kalu claimed the law was necessary to attract investors and visitors, since the FG was doing a poor job of keeping law and order. His sentiments ring true to many Abia residents and traders. When the police stepped in on February 5 to prevent deployment of the state's vigilance force to the town of Ughelli, mass protests ensued. Elderly women reportedly stripped and stood in the way of police, demanding the release of arrested "Bakassi Boys."

Kalu Moves Against Pro-Obasanjo Politicians in Abia

16. On February 14, Kalu had his pro-Obasanjo deputy governor, whose previous impeachment in August 2005 was rescinded, impeached. In addition, Kalu is trying to shorten the tenure of local government councillors in Abia State in order to control the selection of their replacements.

Comment

17. (C) In Abia, as elsewhere, things are heating up. Rival politicians jockey for the post position because the electoral season swiftly approaches. What is bringing Abia to the forefront in this tussle is Kalu's public opposition to President Obasanjo hanging on for a third term and Kalu's own national political ambitions for 2007. Because Kalu is trying for the national limelight, control of his state is even more critical, for his opponents know if he loses control of his state, his larger ambitions implode. Kalu knows this as well. On the surface, this may look like a contest for state's rights within the Nigerian federal context. In reality, this is an old-fashioned skirmish in a much larger political confrontation. End Comment.

BROWNE